

# WHAT ARE THE ZIMBABWE RUINS? THE SOLUTION OF THEIR SECRET

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I.

For three-quarters of a century learned archeologists, travelers and tourists have found a riddle in the origin, purpose and significance of the mysterious ruins of Rhodesia, which are said to be unlike any other buildings on the face of the earth. The most varied suppositions and theories have been put forward in explanation of their meaning. The age of these strange structures is attributed by some to the remotest antiquity measured in millennia, while others regard them as almost contemporary. Some refer their creation to the white race, while others consider them the work of the present inhabitants of that part of Africa, the Bantus. A whole literature has arisen in books and articles devoted to the ruins, which consist of annular walls, turrets and partitions composed of slabs of rectangular pieces of granite without mortar.

Those of Zimbabwe are of three distinct structures: (1) Buildings on a high hill enclosing a cluster of granite rocks at the top; (2) Ruins of sundry walls, also annular, situated in a small valley at the foot of the hill; and (3) Some tolerably well-preserved walls in an ellipsoidal form about thirty-two to thirty-three feet high; within the circuit of the latter are two low turrets, and it is divided by half-ruined partitions into separate compartments, also annular in form. This structure has three narrow doorways; two of them lead straight to the interior of the building, while the third, the northerly one, leads into a long narrow passage formed by the interior walls running parallel to the high outer wall. This passage leads to a small open space where there are two towers, one high, the other low. The ground is of solid massive granite. The various buildings have received entirely capricious names: the Temple, the Acropolis, the Sacred Enclosure, the Gold-smelting Furnace Enclosure, and so on. These names, assuming the significance of the structures, only involve the student in confusion and mislead him.

The problem is complicated by the fact that large areas in Rhodesia are studded with no less than five hundred ruins of the same style and archeological character, and of the period of Zimbabwe<sup>1</sup>. After Zimbabwe the chief remains are those at Khami, about fifteen miles west-north-west of Buluwayo. They are smaller than Zimbabwe, less perfect and less imposing, but of the same type. Then there are the remains at Dhlo Dhlo, Thabas Imamba, Natali, Impanka, Choko, etc. In this class of remains we must also include the Stone Huts of the northern part of the Orange Free State and Southern Transvaal, different from the above but, as we shall see, closely connected with them. These are little known, so I venture to reproduce an extract from the Johannesburg "Star" of 7th June 1930 :

"Some years ago an article appeared on this on the little stone houses on Vechtkop near Heilbron. Subsequently Mr C. van Riet Lowe, the South African archeologist, contributed an article shown that these curious little buildings are scattered over a large part of the northern Free State and that a few are found in the Transvaal south of the Rand. Then a reader of 'The Star,' a farmer of the Bethel district, wrote to say that a far finer collection of the huts was to be found in that area. Circumstances prevented Mr. Lowe from examining it, but this was done by Professor and Mrs. Hoernle, and the following extracts are taken from their report in the 'Bantu Studies': 'The largest hut had an outside measurement in the axis from the door to back of 12,5 ft., with inside measurements in the same axis of 7 ft., and in the side-to-side axis of 6 ft. The smallest hut measured by us had inside measurements of 5 ft. and 4 ft. respectively. The average, as at Vechtkop, was 5 ft. to 5,5 ft. from front to back, and 4 ft. to 4,5 ft. across and 4 ft. in height.

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<sup>1</sup> As determined by R.N. Hall and W.G. Neal in their detailed account, "Ancient Ruins of Rhodesia."

The method of construction was to cantilever undressed doleritic boulders collected from the plentiful supply on the plateau in courses over each other until the opening became small enough to be closed by three long flat slabs. The entrance consists usually of a gap in the lowest course roofed over by a lintel consisting of a single specially large and heavy slab. The usual entrance is so low and narrow (average dimensions: 18 in. wide, 12 to 16 in. high) that the only method of getting in and out is to wriggle flat on one's chest. Even then a man of average height and breadth of shoulder has some difficulty in performing the feat, though, no doubt, European clothes are a handicap. Still, even without clothes, stout individuals among the original inhabitants must have experienced great trouble in using these doors.

Indeed, it is extremely difficult to imagine how these huts can with any comfort have been used as habitations by people who, to judge from the size and weight of the boulders which they lifted, must have been of normal height and strength. No full-grown man or woman can stand or even lie at full length in one of these huts.

... Anyone who was to try to lie at full length in the only axis which might conceivably permit of this—viz., the door-to-back axis—would block the door.”

It is very important to pay close attention to the details of these small but remarkable structures, which in spite of the dissimilarity in construction between them and the ruins of Zimbabwe, have one feature in common with them, that their object and significance are utterly unknown.

There is a rumour that ruins of the same nature have been discovered in Tanganyika even greater than those of Zimbabwe.

## II.

The literature dealing with the subject of the ruins of Zimbabwe is very extensive and varied. We may mention the names of Theodore Bent, Dr Schlichter, Sir John Willoughby, Mound, Phillips, Professor Randall MacIver, Professor Frobenius and Miss Caton-Thompson. To Messrs R. N. Hall and W. G. Neal we are indebted for a detailed and circumstantial account of Zimbabwe and other ruins of Rhodesia.<sup>2</sup>

And we must not omit Sir Rider Haggard, the famous author of “Allan Quatermain”, “Elissa or the Doom of Zimbabwe” and “King Solomon's Mines”, who had never even seen the ruins, and did not visit them until his romances had achieved their immense success and been translated into numerous languages. While, of course, they have contributed nothing whatever to the elucidation of the problem of Zimbabwe, these romances, in which the novelist gave free rein to his unbridled fancy, have contributed not a little to obscure the truth, and have diverted the attention of many investigators who have taken them seriously.

It is Professor Frobenius who has come nearest to the solution, but even he failed to reveal the secret of the African ruins.

One set of investigators attribute the ruins to very ancient origins, carrying back the date of their erection to the year 1100 B.C., and even 2000 B.C. on the basis of geometrical and astronomical examination, to quote Hall and Neal, who see in the Temple of Zimbabwe orientation to the summer solstice. Dr Schlichter sees in Zimbabwe an “enormous gnomon”. The foundation of Zimbabwe is attributed by these writers to “the ancient fire-worshippers”, which theory, they maintain, is supported by the discovery among the ruins of numerous phalli. The authors come to the conclusion that the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah was richly deserved by the inhabitants of Zimbabwe owing to the degraded phallic worship to which they were addicted. The guide-book, “The Great Zimbabwe Ruins”, issued by the Southern Rhodesian Publicity Bureau, positively asserts that a sudden attack on such an inaccessible fortress as the Acropolis “could only have carried that wonderful stronghold when the defenders were weakened or incapacitated by debauchery and religious orgies”. Very many writers even connect these ruins

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<sup>2</sup> “Great Zimbabwe, Mashonaland, Rhodesia”, by R. N. Hall. “Ancient Ruins of Rhodesia”, by R. N. Hall and W. G. Neal.

with the Bible, desperately struggling to prove that Rhodesia is that mysterious land of Ophir whence Solomon and the Queen of Sheba drew their gold and that Zimbabwe was the capital, the emporium of the gold won, a sort of Johannesburg in fact. They connect Zimbabwe with the Phoenicians and Carthaginians, and in the carved images of birds found in the ruins they see the emblem of the goddess Almaquah, the Morning Star, Venus, adored by the ancient Sabaeans of South Arabia, and Astarte of the Phoenicians.

The other class of investigators, on the contrary, denies Zimbabwe any antiquity, laugh at those who attribute the remains to the white race and regard all the numerous ruins dotted about Rhodesia as the work of native Bantu tribes. This school of archeologists considers itself beyond argument, and bases its conclusions on excavations carried out in the ruins, where they found "Nankin china" referred to the sixteenth century of our era, and numerous articles of iron, gold, stone, bronze, brass, in no way different from the articles of the contemporary natives.

At first glance the verdict of the second school seems to be decisive, as it is based on definite facts — that is, excavation among the ruins, and the discovery of fragments of Nankin china "found in the unbroken cement floor" in the ruins of Dhlo Dhlo by Professor Randall MacIver. Similar pieces of china have also been found at Zimbabwe. But closer study of the excavations of the learned explorers leads to disappointment. The work was marred by the omission of essential factors, and the conclusions as to the character and significance of these mysterious structures are founded on nothing. Moreover, the date fixed by them for their construction does not accord with historical data nor with the character and manner of life of the native tribes inhabiting Rhodesia three and four hundred years ago. Further, they speak with superficial and undeserved disdain of the work and observations of the investigators of the first school such as Hall and Neal, whose "Ancient Ruins of Rhodesia" in its descriptive part is a serious and important work.

To the fundamental problem, what are the ruins of Zimbabwe? archeologists of the second school give us no more answer than those of the first. In the opinion of Professor MacIver, all these ruins are nothing more nor less than fortifications and the headquarters of military leaders. This opinion is quite incompatible with the rudiments of military science, and is in direct contradiction with actuality. What was it that was dug up at Zimbabwe and in the other ruins by the adherents of the native origin of these constructions? From the work of Neal and Hall we know well that the ruins were inhabited in the course of centuries by different tribes of natives in turn, that they served as kraals for the chiefs, that within the walls partitions were set up, old ones pulled down, sites leveled for huts and the floor cemented. All this was subject to such numerous changes and modifications that at the present day it is in many places no longer possible to discriminate where the original walls and partitions were. The general use by the natives of a binding material indistinguishable from the ancient cement complicates the problem still further, and even raises the question whether the ancient builders used cement at all. The floor of the ruins consists of granite with layers of sand resting on it. This we may consider as the real foundation of the buildings. A second layer consists of "ashes mixed with sand" covered with cement. Some think that this was a precaution against termites. This layer may be referred to secondary stratification produced by subsequent inhabitants of the ruins, who settled here after the buildings had been abandoned and no longer served their original purpose. Besides this, the whole soil of the ruins has been excavated and turned over more than once by old and recent seekers for the treasure of King Solomon and by prospectors for gold.

The rubbish accumulated within the ruins in the course of centuries is not a true geological sedimentation, and consequently excavations of the sort undertaken in the ruins of Rhodesia by Professor Randall MacIver and Miss Caton-Thompson call for the utmost care and caution in their execution and in the drawing from them of deductions. Even in the investigation of genuine geological deposits most unexpected omissions and mistakes occur, so what is there surprising in the fact that in the excavation of the rubbish in the ruins of Zimbabwe pieces of pottery of the sixteenth century have been found? Especially as "with one or two exceptions

everything was found in the Valley of Ruins”, in the words of Professor MacIver, writing about the discoveries at Zimbabwe. The Valley of Ruins for many centuries has been nothing but the remains of tumbled down walls and partitions built of stones, which served as kraals for many generations of native tribes. Under such conditions it is not surprising to find in the ruins pieces of china “of the age of Victoria” left by some big-game hunter, who drank tea in the shade of the mysterious remains. Professor MacIver himself writes that “at the north-west end of the Elliptical Temple the Makalanga stabled their cattle a generation ago”.

And so we are justified in concluding that the excavation of the rubbish deposited by natives in the course of centuries of habitation of the ruins does not prove anything at all, and fails to give us the key to the secret of Zimbabwe and the other ruins of Rhodesia.

The representatives of both schools are agreed on one point. The buildings of Zimbabwe in one way or another are connected with the gold mines of Rhodesia. Hither there passed, for some unknown reason, convoys of gold on their way to the sea, where ships were awaiting them, as ships wait today, to carry away their precious cargoes to King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba.

III.

What are the characteristic features of the ruins of Zimbabwe and Khami? The first striking peculiarity, not only of Zimbabwe but also of all the numerous other ruins of Rhodesia, is the total absence of roofs. Not in one single instance has there been discovered the slightest trace of a roof, while the walls are extremely substantial and have stood for centuries. Those massive walls enclose something; they preclude ingress from the outside, leaving within an area open to the sun, rain and sky. Large and small, all alike expose to heaven an internal area, carefully protected from the gaze of men and against access from without and from beneath.

Sometimes massive walls, as, for instance, at Khami, enclose only rocks and nothing else. At Zimbabwe the “Acropolis” itself as a matter of fact has as a centre only huge round cliffs, quite inaccessible to man. In the “Acropolis”, and especially at Khami, in many ruins one can detect the endeavour of the builders to render impossible to men and animals approach from below to some quite small space, area or platform. To approach from above, all is open. The impression grows that these structures were erected not for living men nor beasts but for birds, for the inhabitants of the air.

This brings us to the question, why do we find in these buildings sculptures only of birds, birds of the vulture family? Why in the hundreds of ruins at Zimbabwe are there steles and small columnar turrets built of stones, just as though specially prepared for the perching of big birds and for their nests? What strange cult is this, of birds, and birds of one kind only?

All the Zimbabwe ruins are situated on rocky and stony ground, especially on granite, with only a small part on diorite, on dry soil not suitable either for crops or for human dwellings, far from water, and invariably in a remote isolated spot, away from main roads and lines of communication.

Although some authors try to bring some main trade routes through Zimbabwe, the effort is evident, and none of the considerations adduced will stand the slightest criticism. Zimbabwe is situated in a remote enclosed valley, away from any roads which we may suppose to have existed in the locality.

All the buildings have a rounded or ellipsoidal outline; we hardly ever meet with angles, and straight lines are very rare.

The admirable system of drainage had the object of carrying away atmospheric waters from the enclosed area and of keeping the ground dry.

Within the area enclosed by lofty and massive walls we find platforms, just as though for laying out something, and interior partitions shutting in something, for the reception of something which must be shut in, but something which has no need whatever for protection from above and does not fear exposure to the elements and atmospheric influences.

All the buildings are constructed of pieces and slabs of granite. The thousands of tons of this material used in the buildings have been calculated, and some authors express astonishment

at the immense amount of labor expended on it. This surprise, however, is unnecessary. The granite used in the building of Zimbabwe weathers out into regularly separating layers, and there is nothing easier than to collect the pieces, to break them into slabs and build them up into any wall desired. The buildings in the gardens of the hotel at Zimbabwe are clear enough proof of this, for they too are built of just these same slabs of granite.

For what purpose could structures with such strange characteristics and peculiarities have been built?

Now if we exclude modern erections for purely technical purposes, which naturally were impossible at the period of Zimbabwe, all buildings put up by man may be divided into the following categories:

1. Dwellings.
2. Temples and religious edifices.
3. Protective buildings, forts, castles, &c.
4. Stores and warehouses for property, food, goods or cattle.
5. Tombs and similar buildings.

Let us consider in detail to which of these categories we may attribute the ruins of Zimbabwe.

Were they dwellings?

The immense building known as the 'Temple', of course, cannot be regarded as a roofless house. Inside the walls, in Enclosure No. 15, on a layer of cement covering the "ash mixed with sand", was built the Chief's Hut, as shown by Professor Randall MacIver. It is clear that this was the hut of a native chief who made his home in the ruins as a convenient and comfortable place ; but it would be strange to suppose that such a big and complicated structure, with dark long corridors, towers and 80 on, was built to serve as the site for an ordinary negro's hut.

The "Acropolis" is generally regarded as a fort and nobody suggests that these lofty walls, narrow passages and enclosures were erected for the habitation of people as permanent dwellings.

The "Valley of Ruins", Professor MacIver supposes, was the place where rich people lived who had amassed gold from the surrounding population. Although there are no gold workings in the neighborhood of Zimbabwe nor any signs of the exploitation of gold reefs, although Zimbabwe lies aside from the trade routes, it is supposed, for some reason or another, to have been the "distributing centre" for gold, the capital of the district, into which gold flowed. But, we may ask, whence and why did the gold flow here?

The buildings of the "Valley of Ruins" are of the same type of round or oval enclosures, built of stone of the same type as the "Temple", only smaller and clearly of much greater age. They are scattered about without any system, touching each other and in some cases one built on top of the remains of an older one.

Where are the streets of this capital, of this "emporium of gold"? Did the "wealthy people who had amassed gold" really live in enclosures like kraals? No, it is quite clear that these were not human dwellings, much less of rich people who possessed all the gold of the country.

But is not the "Temple" of Zimbabwe in fact a temple, the site of the service of some deity ? The "Sacred Enclosure", with its towers and platforms, certainly does appear to be a place of prayer, of religious ceremonies, of sacrifices. Yet what was the purpose of that long, narrow, gloomy corridor which leads into it? Why is all the rest of the surface of the "Temple" occupied by platforms and rounded enclosures? What sort of a temple was this one without a roof? If this was the site of the ceremonies of "Nature Worshipers", the place of adoration of the Sun, of the Moon or Stars, then what were the high stone walls for, with the corridors, enclosures, partitions and platforms?

Nowhere else in the world, neither in modern nor in ancient days, have we seen anything resembling a temple like this. What deity was worshipped here? What is the meaning of the steles and figures of those grim birds, as though emblems of the goddess Almaquah, Astarte,

Aphrodite? If we regard the temple as a place where “religious orgies” were celebrated, it would have been difficult to imagine a worse and less suitable spot for such a purpose, if only for the reason that it would surely be highly inconvenient to conduct religious orgies exposed to the tropical sun and rains. Everything said on this account in connection with the “Temple” applies equally well to the “Acropolis”.

And so the suggestion that the Zimbabwe buildings served for religious orgies must also be abandoned.

All authors are agreed on one thing, that the “Acropolis” is a military fortification, a citadel in fact. Professor MacIver writes of it: “A hill that rises precipitously to a height of from 200 feet to 300 feet above the valley has been converted by the ingenuity of the builders into an absolutely impregnable stronghold”. The guide-book says: “Apart from archeological and architectural considerations the Acropolis on Zimbabwe Hill offers the student of military engineering and strategy a wide field for investigation. Before the days of modern airplanes and high-velocity guns this hill citadel must have been absolutely impregnable”.

The “military significance” of the Acropolis is absolutely nil. It is strange to speak of the strategic significance of fortress situated in a deep and remote valley, far from water and roads, and, what is more, with nothing to defend. It would be quite unnecessary to invoke airplanes and modern high-velocity guns to break up those dry mortarless walls, built simply of pieces of granite. A few shots from the weapons of antiquity would have sufficed to shatter the whole of the “Acropolis” as a fortified edifice. It is quite unnecessary to be a “student of military engineering” to see that the cross-section of the walls of the “Acropolis” is not of a military type, and that these were not by any means fortified structures. The walls of this soidisant fortress had neither loopholes nor battlements, and have no capabilities at all for active defense. Even the gates, or, more correctly, the narrow doorways, have no defensive value, and an assaulting foe could break them down with ease. When and where in the history of the art of war have been seen such fortresses? And if the “Acropolis” is a citadel, where is the fortress itself? There are no fortified walls to be seen around it. Neither the “Valley of Ruins” nor the “Elliptical Temple” can be regarded as fortifications. Further, what is there inside this ‘inaccessible citadel’? Huge rounded rocks, partitions, enclosures, narrow passages and so little space for people that a hundred soldiers could barely find room there. Where is the store for reserves of food and munitions? Where is the water supply? Where shelter from the violence of tropical storms? And from the arrows of the enemy?

And the natural inaccessibility of the hill itself is a farce. On three sides the approach offers no particular difficulty, with excellent cover behind the rocks for the attackers. On the fourth side the hill certainly presents a steep rocky cliff, but this cliff is no more unclimbable than the Tarpeian Rock at Rome, which it somewhat resembles, and which, as is known, offered no obstacle to the Gauls when they assaulted the hill of the Capitol.

Khami and the other ruins of Rhodesia, which Professor MacIver regards as fortifications, are even less adapted than Zimbabwe to this purpose. In their position on the map it is impossible to detect the slightest hint of any regularity or strategic line.

And so the ruins of Zimbabwe are not military structures, neither strongholds nor fortresses, never have been, and never under any circumstances could have been useful for any military purpose. The only use to which they are suited is to protect those sitting passively within from the attacks of wild beasts. Was it really worth while raising such elaborate structures as the “Acropolis” and “Elliptical Temple” for this, when a mere kraal or zareba of branches of trees would have been enough?

Perhaps, then, the buildings of Zimbabwe were warehouses for goods, or gold, or were shelters for cattle?

Of course, it is quite possible to put cattle in them, as we have seen the native tribe of Makalanga actually did; but to build such a place merely as a stockade for cattle could only be the work of madmen. And what goods could be stored in a roofless warehouse, exposed to all the

rains of a tropical sky? Gold? It is true that some investigators have found time to compute by some unknown method, from old dumps and workings in Rhodesia, that there has been won from them gold to the value of £75,000,000. But, even if we accept this purely conjectural figure, we must still remember that the winning of this great quantity of gold was spread over several centuries. Besides, the precious metal is so compact that it is by no means necessary to build such an immense warehouse for its storing, even if it were all there at once. The design is also totally unsuitable. And as to gold-smelting furnaces, their plan and position show clearly enough that these are nothing more nor less than ordinary native forges, in which gold was occasionally smelted, and nothing more.

But if the buildings of Zimbabwe, Khami, Dhlo Dhlo and the rest were not built for any use for living people, perhaps they were connected with the cult of the dead, with the needs not of the living but of the departed. Nowhere in the neighborhood will you find burial-places beyond the relatively recent graves of natives and the tomb of a Christian missionary at Khami.

It is clear that the ruins are not cemeteries nor mausoleums; in the granite forming the floor of the ruins there are no traces of interments.

There is no doubt that the people who built Zimbabwe and similar ruins in Rhodesia were very numerous. Where, then, did they dispose of the bodies of their dead? Did they bury them in the earth? Did they cremate them? Did they expose them to be devoured by beasts and birds as some tribes do to this day? Did they roast the bodies, eat the meat and bury the bones in special ossuaries, as did, according to the historian Arrian, the Scythians who inhabited the steppes of Turkestan?

To this question Zimbabwe gives a clear and precise answer.

IV.

The ruins of Zimbabwe are not unique. Ancient remains of the same type are to be found in Persia, Turkestan and Southern Arabia, and modern structures of the same kind are in actual use to this day in India.

A description of these buildings, their object and use, is set forth in one of the most ancient books in the world, the bible of the Magi, followers of Zoroaster, the "Zend-Avesta", or, more correctly, "Avesta-i-Zend", setting forth the teaching of Mazdaism.

Zoroaster (Zarathustra) asks Ahura Mazda:

"O Thou Maker of the Material Universe! Whither shall we carry the bones of the dead, O Ahura Mazda! Where shall we place them?"

To which Ahura Mazda made reply:

"You must make a structure for them beyond the reach of the dog, of the fox, of the wolf, inaccessible to the rain from above. If the Mazdayasnians are rich they may construct it of stones, of plaster, or of earth. If they are not rich, they may place the dead on the ground in the light of heaven and looking towards the sun".

In another place :

"Ahura Mazda directs that in every borough there shall be raised, in prevision for such emergency, three small houses for the dead, large enough that a man standing erect in such a house should not strike his skull nor, should he stretch out his hands and feet, strike the walls with them".<sup>3</sup>

Ahura Mazda speaks to Zoroaster:

"On those dachas, O Spitama Zarathustra, thus the fiends revel on there until that stench is rooted in the Dakhmas. Thus from the Dakhmas arises the infection of diseases, itch, hot fever, humours, cold, fever, rickets and hair untimely white. There death has most power on man, from the hour when the sun is down". ("Zend-Avesta", translated by James Darmesteter.)

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<sup>3</sup> I quote from the work «Media, Babylon and Persia, including a Study of the Zend-Avesta», by Zenaide A. Ragozin. London: Fisher Unwin.

By the injunctions of the Divine Will, Ahura Mazda lays down the structure of “dakhmas” – that is, special buildings for the exposure of dead Mazdaists, sometimes incorrectly known as Fire-Worshippers, for consumption by vultures.

Almost all the ruins of Rhodesia and the Transvaal are dakhmas. These are of two types, the first big, one might say, urban dakhmas (the “Elliptical Temple”, the “Acropolis”, the ruins of Khami and Dhlo Dhlo), and others rural or, more accurately, the dakhmas of nomads, small and covered in, the Stone Huts of the Johannesburg “Star”.

V.

The teaching of Zarathustra, or, as the Greeks corrupted the name, Zoroaster, was the religion of the ancient Persians and Medes. This monotheistic faith recognised a Supreme Spiritual Being, Creator of the Material World, the Personification of Good, Ahura Mazda. In contrast to him was the Principle of Evil, the spirit Ahriman, the Demon, who carried on from the beginning of time an unceasing war with Ahura Mazda, which, at the end of all things, must finish in the victory of Good over Evil. The Mazdaists revered the four Sacred Elements — Fire, Water, Air and Earth. Fire enjoyed a special respect, the Sacred Emblem of Life and of the Supreme Spiritual Principle. The perpetual fire was kept burning on a special altar, and we may note that as late as the sixties of the last century in the neighborhood of Baku, at Surakhany, there stood the Temple of the Fire-Worshippers, consisting of columns with altars between them, to which were conducted the natural inflammable gases which are abundantly given off from the petroliferous deposits in this neighborhood. Day and night on the tops of the columns and on the altar this natural fire burned, arising from the earth, from the remotest antiquity. The sight was impressive to a degree. Of course, the “conquering march of civilization” has swept from the face of the earth this interesting survival of the most ancient of religions, and replaced it by petroleum derrick.

Mazdaism evidently arose out of the primeval religion of the Aryans, Nature Worship, Gothic Religion and Magianism, all fused and confused in various ways<sup>4</sup>.

The rules of the first of these, which are especially reflected in that part of the Zend-Avesta known as the Gathas, permitted the burial of corpses in the ground, and further, according to Herodotus, the bodies were smeared with wax. But the religion of the Magi, Magianism, did not allow interment: it ordained the exposure of the bodies to consumption by birds, and in the most ancient times they clearly admitted dogs also to this purpose (484 B.C.).

The Roman historian Strabo writes that “the Magi do not bury their dead, but leave them to be devoured by birds”. The Magi were not Persians but one of the tribes of the Medes. Herodotus relates that “the Medes were divided into several tribes: Busae, Paraetakeni, Stronchates, Budii and Magi”. In Persia the Magi formed the class of priests, as in ancient times in Persia there was between the people and the sacerdotal caste not only an ethnic difference but their religious views and customs were in sharp contrast. Gradually these faiths fused completely. What in the eyes of the Achaemenidae was the custom only of the priestly caste, such as the exposure of the dead to be devoured by birds, by the time of the Sassanids (226-637 A.D.) had become the general and strictly observed custom, departure from which was severely punished.

Properly speaking, Zoroaster was not the founder of Mazdaism but really a religious reformer. Authorities differ as to his date, some refer him to the remotest antiquity, even to sixty or seventy centuries before Christ, while others place him about 700 B.C. Probably we are not far from the truth if we put his birth and activity somewhere about the beginning of the first millennium before Christ.

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<sup>4</sup> "Cambridge Ancient History", vol. iv. p. 203.



The “Zend – Avesta”, the Sacred Book of the Magi, became known to Europeans only in the eighteenth century. It forms the sacred writings of the Parsees, as the followers of Zoroaster in India today are called. A small number of them, some ten thousand or so, still survive in Persia in the provinces of Kerman and Yezd; but the majority, over a hundred thousand souls, inhabit India, of whom over seven thousand live in Bombay and its neighborhood. The famous Towers of Silence near Bombay, so often described and illustrated, are really contemporary dakhmas. Their external appearance and even their dimensions show a striking resemblance to the “Elliptical Temple” of Zimbabwe, although the internal arrangement of the latter, as well as of all ancient dakhmas, is different. It is surprising that such a resemblance has remained unnoticed by the scientific observers of Zimbabwe.

The bible of the Persians is a book of the greatest antiquity. It sent forth the teaching, rules, faith and ceremonies of the most ancient and remarkable religion of the world. Not the whole of the Avesta has come down to us, and many parts are completely lost. It consists of different sections written in prose and in verse. For instance, the part called Gathas consists of hymns describing the teaching and ordinances of the faith, while the Vendidad sets forth in prose the ritualistic side of Mazdaism. It is only with the Vendidad that we are concerned. As in the case of our own Bible, the Avestas were written at different times, nor is it in one language only. There are several dialects of different periods and provinces of Persia. This language is called Avestan. Properly speaking, it was not the language of the Persians but of the Magi.

The commentaries—that is, the Zend proper—are written in the medieval language of Persia, Pehlevi. This was a very strange tongue; the written language differed entirely from the spoken. Words were written in Aramaic—that is, the language of the Jews of the time of Jesus Christ—but pronounced as in Persian. We have analogous cases in English, such as when we pronounce the Latin abbreviation “e.g.”, not *exempligratia*, but “for instance”.

From the book Vendidad and from the description of the contemporary ritual of the Parsees we can form a complete picture of the dakhmas, the part they played in the life of the Mazdaists and their identity with Zimbabwe and the other ruins of Rhodesia.

As I have stated, the four elements of fire, air, water and earth were considered by the Mazdaists sacred, and severe punishment awaited the man who dared to defile the holy elements. The human body after the departure of the soul was the most hideous and unclean thing in the world.

“According to the Avesta, burying corpses in the earth is one of the most heinous sins that can be committed. We know that under the Sassanians a Prime Minister, Scores, paid with his life for an infraction of that law. Corpses were to be laid down on the summits of mountains, there to be devoured by birds and dogs. The exposure of corpses was the most striking practice of Mazdeian confession, and its adoption was the sign of conversion (550 - 330 B.C.)<sup>5</sup>.”

It was also forbidden to burn bodies or throw them into water for fear of polluting those elements. Further, the mere exposure of corpses in remote, lonely, dry places was admitted only in case of emergency, as beasts or birds might scatter parts of the bodies, and so defile the water or grass on which clean animals feed. From such considerations arose the necessity of constructing special edifices—that is, dakhmas, where the bodies of Mazdaists could be eaten by birds only. On the Towers of Silence near Bombay there sit hundreds of vultures, resting after their fearful feast or awaiting a new and abundant repast.

When do the remains of bodies become clean? “When the bones fall into dust”, replied the Vendidad.

In the modern dakhmas of India the bodies are arranged in an amphitheatre with special compartments, and the bones afterwards thrown into a pit occupying the centre of the dakhma, where the remains of all the population are mingled in a common grave, a true leveling of all men in the face of death.

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<sup>5</sup> “The Zend-Avesta”, translated by James Darmesteter, Part I., p. XIX.

In ancient dakhmas, as may be seen in the illustration in Ragozin's work, the interior of the dakhma has enclosures just as at Zimbabwe. Some served as platforms for the exposure of the bodies to the birds, while in others the bones were stored until under the action of rain and sun they were converted into dust.

## VI.

I will venture here to introduce a long quotation from a work referred to already, "Media, Babylon and Persia", giving an account of the teaching of the Vendidad on the treatment of corpses.

"Given the absolute premises: first, that the elements are pure and holy and must not be defiled; and secondly, that the essence of impurity is death, as the work of the Angra Mainya, 'The Spirit who is all Death', and who takes undisputed possession of the human body the moment that the breath of life, the gift of Ahura Mazda, has left, the question, 'What is to be done with the dead?' becomes an exceedingly complicated and difficult one. The presence of a corpse pollutes the air; to bury it in the earth or sink it into water were equally sacrilegious; to burn it in the fire after the manner of the Hindus and of many Indo European nations would be the height of impiety, an inextinguishable crime, involving no end of calamities to the whole country.

Only one way is open: to let the bodies of the dead be devoured by wild animals or birds. Such, indeed, is the law: the corpses shall be taken to a distance from human dwellings and holy things, if possible into the wilderness, where no men or cattle pass, and be exposed, 'on the highest summits where they know there are always corpse-eating dogs and corpse-eating birds', and there to be fastened by the feet and by the hair with weights of brass, stone or lead, lest the dogs and birds carry portions of the flesh or bones to the water and to the trees and thus defile them. The worshippers of Mazda are enjoined, 'if they can afford it to erect' a building for the purpose of exposing the dead, of stone and mortar, out of the reach of the dog, the wolf, the fox and wherein rain water cannot stay; if they cannot afford it they shall lay down the dead man on the ground, on his carpet and his pillow, clothed with the light of heaven (i.e., naked) and beholding the sun" (p. 125).

"Vendidad, v.14, considers the falling of the rain on the corpse in the dakhmas and on the impure liquids as a great advantage".

"So after ascertaining from Ahura Mazda what are the places where the earth feels more happy, Zarathustra proceeds to inquire what are the places where she feels sorest grief, and receives, among others, the following replies:

'It is the place wherein most corpses of dogs<sup>6</sup> and men lie buried. ... It is there whereon stand most of those dakhmas, whereon corpses of men are deposited'.

'The Dakhma, also called by modern Parsis the Tower of Silence, is the burying-place, or, rather, the cemetery, for the name of burial would ill become the singular and, to us, revolting way in which the Mazdayasnians of Northern Eran disposed of their dead, religiously followed therein by their Parsi descendants" (p. 124).

"The funeral ceremonies of the Parsis are solemn and imposing. They are described in detail in the book 'The History of the Parsees', by Dosabhai Framji Karaka. The Dakhmas in Bombay on the highest point of the Malabar Hills rise some 25 ft. high, with a small door at the side. Prayers are said in the sagri or House of Prayer, containing a fire sanctuary, which is erected near the entrance to the garden.

Only special despised officials set apart for this place are allowed actually to touch the body, and they must scrupulously observe certain fixed rules. These corpse-bearers, clothed in

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<sup>6</sup> It is to be noted that among the ancient Mazdaists dogs enjoyed the highest consideration and were respected above all animals and in every way treated as the equal of man. In the Gathas, the Book of Hymns of the Zend-Avesta, we find touching hymns composed in honour of the friend of man which would delight all dog fanciers and dog lovers.

white, with 'hand-cover on their hands, carry on an iron bier. Wood being more liable to infection, the bier must be of iron' (Vendidad, iii. 14.) After the prayer these special attendants raise the body to its final resting- place, lay upon it its stony bed and retire”.

“A round pit about six ft. deep is surrounded by an annular stone pavement about 7 ft. wide, on which the body is exposed to the vultures. On the third day after death an assemblage of the relatives and friends of the deceased takes place at his last residence, and thence proceeds to the Atishbahram, or ‘fire-temple’. The priests stand before the urns in which the celestial fire is kept burning, and recite prayers”.

«The Parsees compute time from the fall of Yazdegert, the last king of the Sassanian dynasty, who was dethroned by the Caliph Omar about A.D. 640”.

VII.

Now let us consider how this brief information about the disposal of the dead among the Mazdeian Fire-Worshippers, both ancient and contemporary, can be applied to the elucidation of the riddle of the ruins.

At the first glance at the “Elliptical Temple” of Zimbabwe its external resemblance to the Towers of Silence at Bombay at once strikes the eye; we only miss the vultures sitting on the walls. We see the object of the long, narrow, gloomy passage leading from the “main or northern entrance” to the ‘Sacred Enclosure, the so-called “Parallel Passage”, which, going along the inner wall, winds almost half round the building. This is really the main entrance, where they would bring in the body of the departed accompanied by his relatives and friends. The lofty inner walls were necessary to shelter the mourners, not only from the ghastly sight of the decomposing bodies but also from the air infected with stench and corruption. The cortège would pass along this corridor to the “Sacred Enclosure”, which was the sagri of the Parsees, the place where burned the perpetual fires, where were offered up prayers for the departed. In this case the name of Sacred Enclosure is quite appropriate.

The small conical towers were probably altars. Here relatives and friends bade their last farewell and the bodies were borne by special officials to the “Central Area”, where they were exposed to the devouring greed of the vultures. The bones were probably stored in the “Enclosure No. 1”, or possibly in No. 7, as illustrated in the plan attached to the Guide to Zimbabwe.

Those who attended on the bodies, of course, for their own purposes had no need to pass through the long corridor. They went in and out of the dakhma through the door marked on the plan “West Entrance” and “North-West Entrance”. Only a perverted imagination could see in the large conical tower a phallic emblem. The Mazdaists had not even a trace of such a cult. The large conical tower was probably a mere architectural adornment to the dakhma, or, perhaps, a nesting-place or perch for the vultures to attract these birds which fulfilled the main purpose of the edifice.

In the “Temple” we find an admirable system of drainage, in obedience to the injunction of the Zend-Avesta to carry away atmospheric waters and not allow them to lie.

In general, if we apply the explanation of the Zend-Avesta to the ruins of Rhodesia, we see how simply and easily every detail is accounted for and every peculiarity of structure.

But in the commands of Ahura Mazda we find a contradiction : “Although the building of dakhmas has at all times been considered a meritorious act of piety, we are told that the man who gladdens the earth with the greatest joy is he who pulls down most of those dakhmas on which corpses of men are deposited”. Of course, we must not suppose that in ancient Persia only devout men built dakhmas while others pulled them down. Obviously the reference is to old ones no longer usable, the destruction of which would be an act agreeable to the deity. If we examine the “Valley of Ruins” attentively we see that they are nothing more nor less than old dakhmas. Even the “Temple” is built alongside the still standing walls of an old dakhma. The space between them and the outer wall of the “Temple” is known as the “Outer Parallel Passage”; this parallel passage formed no constructional part of the “Temple”, but was merely fortuitous. By the

character of the stones, the degree of weathering and the coarseness of the work, it is evident that the buildings of the "Valley of Ruins" are the oldest part of Zimbabwe. The dakhmas here are simple in design, and evidently were the first buildings of this nature erected; perhaps they took each other's place in turn for centuries. Perhaps in the ancient period of Mazdaism the pulling down of dakhmas was periodic. The modern Zoroastrians, the Parsees, do not pull theirs down. The small dakhmas, on the other hand, the "Stone Huts" of the Free State, Transvaal and Turkestan, offer no evidence of intentional destruction.

We may, with great probability, assume that the 'Acropolis' was built after the dakhmas of the 'Valley of Ruins.' The structure is more complex, and fulfils more exactly the injunctions of the Vendidad. It is on the top of a hill, has more divisions and soon. The "Temple", of course, is the last and latest dakhma. Its walls are but little weathered, it is more skillfully constructed and its internal arrangement corresponds more exactly to the ritual; also, it more closely resembles the modern dakhmas of the Towers of Silence of the Parsees of Bombay and the old dakhmas of Persia, as, for instance, the one near Teheran, an illustration of which is given in Ragozin's work.

In the "Acropolis" we see a dakhma built probably at the time when the population of the neighborhood had considerably increased, and become so rich that it had the means for the erection of so elaborate a structure. The top and central portion is occupied by huge granite rocks, rounded through weathering, occupying the place of the "Last Conical Tower", a perch, or perhaps an eyrie, for the vultures. Possibly the builders of the "Temple" erected this tower in imitation of the rocks of the "Acropolis", but this, of course, is mere conjecture. The walls encircling the hill of the "Acropolis" and, below, the so-called "Inner Hill Defence Wall" enclose the "Outspan Ruins". This was clearly the entrance into the "garden" which surrounded the open space of the "Acropolis". Here the "conical tower just in front of the entrance" at once strikes the eye, undoubtedly an altar. All this is very like the garden surrounding the Towers of Silence at Bombay. Another peculiarity of the "Outspan Ruins" is the "Sentry Box", a large niche in the walls, which under no circumstances could be a place for a sentry, for that would involve this highly original fortress, with all its incongruities with military design, having its sentries standing with their backs to the enemy, hidden from above and on the flanks in such a way that they could not see **anything at all**. But if we presume that it was the place where the Sacred Fire was guarded, as we have seen, in special urns, clearly a sort of massive lamp, we realize at once that it fits in perfectly with the ritual of the Vendidad.

From the foot of the hill to the top on the south-east and north-west there are two narrow steep paths. Both lead to an open space called the 'Western Enclosure. The so-called "Western Temple" adjoins it, a round area bounded on the east by natural rocks enclosed by many artificial partitions ; and on the west by a thick stone wall which is penetrated by a door leading from the open space into the "Western Temple". "The curved wall of this Temple is 137 feet in length, twenty-five feet above the exterior ground level, and has a width on the summit varying from twelve to fourteen feet. It is possible to walk along the summit, as the top surface is made up of smoothly laid flat slabs of granite".<sup>7</sup>

Here we see a broad wall raised especially for the exposure of corpses. On it are some low turrets with flat tops, and here there stood steles, monoliths for the perching of vultures.

On the eastern part of the hill, on the other side of the group of rocks which form the kernel of the "Acropolis", is another enclosure, the "Eastern Temple", where there are benches for the disposal of bodies arranged in an amphitheatre, just as in the contemporary dakhmas of India. Clearly these two temples, on the east and on the west, were two distinct dakhmas on the same hill, built perhaps at different periods. The other enclosures represent either stores for bones or had some auxiliary use.

In the "Acropolis" there is also a "Parallel Passage" beginning from the "Western

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<sup>7</sup> "The Great Zimbabwe Ruins", published by the South Rhodesia Publicity Bureau, p. 62.

Enclosure” — that is, from the space where the paths meet the stairs which lead up the hill, it goes along the edge of the cliff, then turns sharply to the north and, through the “South Enclosure”, leads by a steep rise to the “Platform Enclosure”, a high platform dominating all the hill. From there a half-ruined stairway leads to the top of the hill itself on to a granite rock, where formerly there stood massive monoliths, now prone upon the ground. We may presume that this passage, encircling the dreadful dakhma, “the Western Temple”, led to the platform where prayers were offered up for the departed and the Sacred Fire burned.

It is clear that various parts of the “Acropolis” were built at different periods. The “Eastern Temple” would be a later construction; its amphitheatre for bodies and the stone steles with the figures of birds found here speak of greater architectural skill.

But we must beware of falling into the same mistake as several students of the Rhodesian ruins, who classify them into different periods according to their architectural development into the First Zimbabwe Period, the Second Zimbabwe Period and so on. It is really perfectly clear that differences in architectural perfection on buildings may arise simultaneously. Otherwise all Johannesburg, which is not yet a century old, would be divided into periods: the villas in the Dutch style on the outskirts of the town would belong to the sixteenth century and the skyscrapers to a part of the twentieth.

Still stranger is the division of African history into periods based on the beads of native women; just as though feminine caprice and the tastes of different tribes, to which dusky beauties are as susceptible as their white sisters, could be used as a criterion for dividing the history of the continent into periods.

However, we may be sure that the lofty hill of Zimbabwe, which is not so very inaccessible by nature, was converted by the builders not into any “impregnable fortress”, as the students of the ruins consider without any real basis, but into an intricate complex of simple buildings for the purpose of the destruction of the bodies of the followers of one of the most ancient and lofty religions of the world.

We have stated above that buildings similar to the ruins of Zimbabwe are to be found in India, the Towers of Silence of the Parsees. They are to be found, too, in Persia, among contemporary “fire-worshippers”. Ancient dakhmas survive at different parts of Persia, such as the well-known one near Teheran, at Yezd and elsewhere.

A Portuguese traveller of the sixteenth century, de Conto, after describing the ruins of Zimbabwe and attributing them to King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba, writes that “buildings similar in plan, construction, towers and ceremonial purposes to those of Zimbabwe Temple are to be found in South Arabia and round the Persian Gulf. These are of undoubted antiquity”.

In Turkestan large dakhmas in the towns and villages were built of loess and clay, and consequently little of them has survived, but still I do know one fairly well preserved. In the region of the nomad population, in the mountains and hills around a plain of no very great extent, “Stone Huts” are exceedingly numerous and for the most part arranged in groups, but it is rare to find a dakhma preserved. The vast majority are partly or totally ruined. There is one quite well preserved at my copper mine in the Khodjen district. It is situated on hard rock on the slopes of the hills, built without mortar, in every way like the Stone Huts of the Transvaal, and fulfils the injunction of Ahura Mazda. The same dimensions, the same external appearance and so on.

The natives of Turkestan call these dakhmas Mug khans — that is, Houses of the Magi — though, of course, they do not know what they were used for. Turkestan formed part of the ancient Persian Empire under the name of Khorassan.

And now I invite the reader to compare attentively the injunctions of Ahura Mazda how to build small dakhmas with the description of them in “The Star” of Johannesburg:

THE INJUNCTIONS OF AHURA MAZDA —

« ... in every borough there shall be raised, in prevision of such an emergency, three small houses for the dead, large enough that a man standing erect in such a house should not strike his

skull, nor, should he stretch out his hands and feet, strike the walls with them.»

DESCRIPTION OF STONE HUTS IN “THE STAR” –

«... The largest hut had an outside measurement in the axis from door to back of 12 1/2 ft., with inside measurement of the same axis of 7 ft., and in the side to side axis of 6 ft. ... No full-grown man or woman can stand or even lie at full length in one of these huts. ...»

Here in different expressions and different words are described one and the same thing, “small dakhmas”. At least thirty centuries separate the two accounts.

Judging by Professor Maciver’s description of the Nieker ruins, there are dakhmas of another type, like the modern Towers of Silence, with a central pit for the bones. This pit the professor considers the “last refuge” of the defenders of the fortress.

In these Nieker ruins together with iron implements were found flint arrow-heads. This “mingling of the centuries”, of the Stone and Iron Ages, with the omission of the Bronze, has puzzled the worthy archeologists, accustomed to sharp distinctions, though quite unnecessarily. The division into Stone, Bronze and Iron ages in one and the same locality is often artificial. Let us recall the words of Herodotus in his description of the Persian armies on the punitive expedition against Greece. Writing of the personnel and armament of this immense force, he mentions wild tribesmen auxiliaries armed with arrows tipped with flint. In the Persian armies there were therefore mingled all three ages: Stone, Bronze and Iron. From the above it stands out perfectly clearly that in the history of that part of Africa there was a period when the ancient Persian culture and the ancient Persian religion were dominant here, and that the prevailing element consisted of men of the white race who came from Asia. A further indication of this is seen in the occurrence of numerous vines and fig-trees among the ruins of Rhodesia and round most of the old mines. We meet the same thing in the Transvaal. There is one more important fact confirming the connection between Asia and this part of Africa — that is, the irrigation system, extremely skillfully laid out in the Inyanga District, described by Hall and Neal, who write: “Whoever they were, they seem to have had quite as good a knowledge of irrigation as any of us have to-day”. In this locality, besides the remarkable irrigation system, there are very well laid out terraced slopes, recalling our Central Asiatic and Japanese works of the same character. There is no doubt that the Inyanga Territory at the period was the granary of this part of Africa.

The most ancient system of ancient system of irrigation without pumps is to be found in Persia and Turkestan, and the vine and the fig are endemic in these countries.

And so the facts are clear. Zimbabwe and at least the greater part of the ruins of Rhodesia, the Stone Huts of the Transvaal and of the Free State, are nothing more nor less than dakhmas of the Mazdaists, relics of a considerable population, of their culture and of their immense influence in South Africa. History knows of no other followers of Zoroaster than the ancient Persians and their descendants the Parsees. Hence we are justified in drawing the conclusion that at some period of history the ancient Persians arrived in this part of Africa; brought hither their culture (irrigation), their plants (the vine and the fig), and perhaps, too, sorgo, durra, or Kaffir corn; became the dominating element among the native population, spread their religious influence over an extensive area and, in all probability, converted many tribes to Mazdaism, for, of course, the Stone Huts of the Transvaal and Free State and many dakhmas of Rhodesia belonged to the native population. They laid out extensive communities, towns, villages, and also introduced the mining of reef gold just as they did in Turkestan. Alluvial gold had been worked by natives since prehistoric days.

VIII.

Now we have to face the problem, when did all this happen? How and at what period did this culture, introduced into Africa by members of the Indo-European race, pass away unnoticed and disappear without trace? For the answers to this question let us analyse the historical data. First of all, of course, we must exclude the supposition about the prehistoric origin of Zimbabwe and the other ruins of Rhodesia and the Transvaal. On no grounds could they be referred to an

earlier date than about 700 or 1000 B.C. — that is, before the life and teaching of Zoroaster; and we must also entirely exclude the fanciful theory of Professor MacIver of the building of the “Elliptical Temple” of Zimbabwe by natives “not earlier than the fourteenth or fifteenth centuries”. Between the eleventh and the fifteenth centuries the Persians living at Sofala, a port on the shores of the Indian Ocean, often visited Zimbabwe, and in their reports refer to these ruins as “very old”. They relate that the natives had no knowledge of the builders of these ruins nor of who lived in them. They had no tradition whatever about them.<sup>8</sup>

In the sixteenth century Portuguese writers who lived in this country report that stone buildings described by them were “of ancient origin, “most ancient”, “ancient ruins of stone”, “foundations of walls, castles”, etc. Of de Conto’s report we have already spoken. De Barros considered the buildings to be those of Agysimba mentioned by Ptolemy (150 A.D.).

From 1503, when a Portuguese expedition took Sofala and annexed the district to their territory, allusions to this part of Africa become more frequent, but in them there is no hint of the existence any- where here of any other population than the native.

On the other hand, the Persians who lived on the shores of the Indian Ocean from the eleventh century no longer recognized in Zimbabwe their own old dakhmas. They were strict Mohammedans. And in the neighborhood of Sofala, which was then an important port, through which passed the trade with Arabia, Persia and India, there are no dakhmas at all. These allusions at once throw the period of Zimbabwe back into the more remote past.

The religion of Zoroaster, widespread through Persia, was crushed and wiped out there by the Sword of Islam. In 641 A.D. the Arabs broke up the army of Yezdegerd III., the last of the Sassanids, a dynasty that was once the terror of its foes, and conquered Iran. An insignificant remnant of Persians remained true to their ancient faith Mazdaism, and, unwilling to submit to the conqueror, emigrated. After wandering aimlessly for some years they reached the western coast of India, and settled in the province of Gujerat, where the local princes showed them a generous hospitality and gave them complete religious toleration. This explains why the vernacular of the Parsees to-day is not Persian but Gujerati. Their settlement in Bombay dates only from the British occupation of that part of India. In Persia itself by the tenth century only an insignificant colony of Mazdaists was left, in the provinces of Fars and Kerman. It is a natural supposition that another group of Persian Mazdaists wandered to the east coast of Africa, and founded here a substantial colony.

Against this hypothesis there is the undoubted fact that we have no historical records of it. In the second place, none of the Arab travelers mention the existence of an extensive colony of Persians within the African continent, or of a large foreign or native population united either politically into a single whole or at least connected by a single common faith and ritual. Such an extensive religious unit could not have passed unnoticed by the observant Arab geographers, who have left us remarkable descriptions of the countries they visited.

One Arab writer, Abu-Zeid Hassan, who visited Africa about the year 900 A.D., describes the “land of Zandy” (north of Sofala) and the coast of Sofala. He describes the gold and ivory trade of these territories, and states that the natives bartered the gold and ivory to Persian and Arabian merchants, who trafficked their gold to their own countries and also to India, while ivory was exported even to far-distant China. But he speaks of such commerce as having been established centuries prior to his time. This commerce is believed to have been a survival of a trade in gold which existed in still earlier times, possibly before the commencement of the Christian era. Rock mining in the course of centuries deteriorated until it became dissolved into the washing of river sand for gold, as is described in the Portuguese records of the fifteenth century, and strongly implied in the writings of Mahsud.

In 1000 A.D. another Arab writer, Al Byrony, describes the commerce of Sofala. About 1150 A.D. Edrisi, the Arab geographer, describes Sofala as a “country of gold”.

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<sup>8</sup> This and the following historical I take from the of R. N. Hall.

Similar information about Sofala as a gold-producing land is to be found also in the Arabian writers Ibn Sayd (1250 A.D.) and Al Bakuni and Abdel-Rasgai (1403 A.D.). Of these writers we have a specially important allusion in Mahsud, who deservedly enjoys a reputation for authority. From his writing it is clear that by the tenth century there were no more Mazdaists or Persian colonists left in Rhodesia, that a brisk trade between this part of Africa and India, Arabia, Persia and even China had been in full swing some centuries earlier, but had fallen into a decline; that the previously highly developed gold industry which included the working of reef ores had also fallen into decay. This, we may remark, was not due to exhaustion of supplies, as there is gold enough in the country even today. Consequently for a period of one or two centuries before Christ and for four or five after, mining and commerce in the south-eastern portion of the African continent were in a flourishing condition. Are we not justified in assuming the presence in the interior of Africa, fed by the port of Sofala, of an extensive colony of Persians with an immense influence on the trade and industrial development of the country and upon its native population? As the west of Europe was in the Dark Ages, we find in contemporary writers no allusions to the life of this part of the world. But there is no doubt that the district teemed with life. We must remember that at this period there was connection between the Red Sea and the Mediterranean established by Ramesses II., a Suez canal that cut through the lakes and the Nile.

From data supplied by Greek merchants who travelled in the first century after Christ, Ptolemy calculated the latitude of the sources of the Nile, or properly speaking, the issue of the Nile from Lake Albert, and fixed it at 2° N., with an error of only twenty-five minutes. In 77 A.D. there was published in Alexandria a pilot's manual, the famous "Periplus of the Red Sea", not unlike our modern Admiralty Sailing Directions.<sup>9</sup>

This was the flourishing period of the Persian Empire, when it attained its greatest military power, material wealth and culture. Arabian science, literature and art, widely recognized in the European world, were not founded suddenly by these half-wild nomads. Their roots go deep into the ancient culture of Persia. The Arabs only adopted it and continued its development. The Persians of the period were the custodians of the ancient literature of the Greeks, of their theatre and philosophy.

On the basis of all these data we can, I maintain, refer to this period with a substantial portion of probability the colonisation by Persian Mazdaists of that part of the African continent which nowadays bears the names of Rhodesia and the Transvaal. If we suppose that the colonization arose at an earlier epoch we are confronted with the difficulty that the method of disposal of the dead in dakhmas became general and obligatory only towards the beginning of the period. Before this time — that is, at the beginning of the dynasty of the Achemenide — it was only a special ritual of the sacerdotal class, the tribe of the Magi, and not obligatory on the rest of the population. We can hardly suppose that only Magi penetrated into Africa at a much earlier period, and established here their religion and method of burial.

Our investigations of Zimbabwe and parts of other African ruins throw an entirely new light on the history of this part of the continent, reveal a new epoch in its annals, and tell of centuries of civilized and cultured life in a land that in recent days was savage. They speak of the existence here of a culture brought over from Asia and of the wide and undoubtedly profound influence on the native population, and partly determine the period to which we may refer it.

IX.

Now two questions arise. First, how is it that the existence of the Asiatic civilization, the domination here of one of the most lofty faiths of antiquity through the course of centuries, passed away utterly unnoticed and remained so long unknown to the educated world? Secondly, why did this civilisation, these rich colonies, perish without leaving trace?

The answer to the first question is offered in the analogous existence in the immense and

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<sup>9</sup> "The Opening up of Africa", by Sir H.H. Johnstone (p.109).



fearful sandy deserts of Central Asia of the culture of “Serindia”, and the art of Gondwana. Before the explorations of Sir Aurel Stein, what was known in the educated world of the existence of large and wealthy cities, of the products of a peculiar art, of libraries containing thousands of manuscripts in the Sanskrit, Chinese, Tibetan, Greek, Uigur, Sogdian and other languages, bearing witness to the profound intellectual development of a people who lived about the same period to which we attribute the Rhodesian ruins, in a country where to-day there are only endless miles of shifting sands, the grave of man and beast alike? In Asia the dry sand of the desert has preserved for us the precious relics of a civilization forgotten by the world. In Africa the climate, the tropical rains, the moist heat and the exuberant vegetation have wiped off the face of the world all traces of the Perso-Asiatic civilization, leaving only the ruins of their dreadful dakhmas, where the bodies of men and women were devoured by birds.

“Thus the fiends revel on there until that stench is rooted in the dakhmas. There Death has most power on man from the hour when the sun is down”, said Ahura Mazda to his disciple, the religious reformer, Spitama Zarathustra.

The question why, how and when the civilisation brought by Persian Mazdaists into Africa perished is difficult and complicated. The ancient cities and civilisations of Serindia perished from the destruction of their irrigation system in war. Africa at one blow? Are we to suppose that a martial and well-armed people like the Persians, rich in experience of the contemporary art of war, mindful of the military tradition of the Sassanids, who beat the armies of the Greeks, fought, and fought successfully, with the legions of Rome herself, could not withstand the rude, ill-armed and poorly organized if numerous hordes of native tribes?

The account given by the Arab geographer Mahsud does not mention anything of the sort, and memories of such a catastrophe must have lingered on, if only in the form of a vague tradition, among the natives of Sofala and the coast.

On the contrary, Mahsud describes some kind of slow decline, a gradual decay of commerce and mining. If this is so, are we not justified in admitting another explanation? Could not the chief part in this drama have been played by the diseases of Africa and a gradual weakening and extinction of the foreign population? Black-water fever, sleeping sickness and malaria could in this case have played a decisive role and swept away the whole population belonging to the white race. Indeed, the decay of ancient Greece and decline and fall of Rome, which became an easy prey to the assaults of a barbarian horde, are attributed by many modern historians to the spread and expansion of malaria, against which the ancient world was not in a position to fight. Weakening them physically, robbing them of energy, malaria was capable of gradually bringing a population of Asiatic origin to spiritual degeneration and to extinction. Does not the “Elliptical Temple”, the last of the dakhmas of Zimbabwe, tell by its very structure of the beginning of the impending doom?

Let us consider for a moment the question of phallic worship credited to the builders so undeservedly. Mazdaism was a very pure and elevated religion, full of lofty morals.

It preached humanity and, what is specially remarkable in those remote days, it taught and demanded love of dumb animals, the friends of man. Neither in the Zend-Avesta nor among the ancient Magi and Mazdaists, nor among our contemporary Parsees of India, who enjoy general respect on account of their high moral qualities, do we find any trace of phallic worship or of religious eroticism, such as are attributed by some authors to the builders of Zimbabwe.

The discovery of numerous phalli in the rubbish accumulated in the course of centuries in the ruins of Zimbabwe do not prove anything more than do fragments of china cups to which a decisive significance has been given. Nobody who knows anything of the life of negroes will be surprised that phalli should be found in buildings where they have lived for centuries. It is the fashioning of phalli from any suitable material handy, such as stone, wood, clay, or even mere mud. What is there to be surprised at if they find some pieces of soapstone that are easily worked with a mere knife and make phalli of them? They must not be judged too critically.

In ancient days this emblem had none of the impolite significance which it bears today

among cultivated people. The ancient Roman matrons of good families wore phalli as brooches and ornaments.

Drawings of phalli have been found in the tombs of Vikings in Norway. In the monastery of Lamayouru in Western Tibet I have seen models of phalli and lingams made of dough before the altar of Buddha. In ancient days the phallus was the emblem of the productive force of nature; sometimes it served as a talisman or charm, sometimes as an object of magic and witchcraft. In the pre-Mohammedan period respect of the phallus was widely spread in Arabia, Southern Persia and India, but this was not a special form of cult, and was quite foreign to the spirit of Mazdaism. In some architectural forms of early Moslem art, and even in the later period, phallic models are met with, as, for instance, the towers of the famous mosque of Ulug-Bek at Samarcand. But it would be just as strange to look upon the Conical Towers of the “Elliptical Temple” of Zimbabwe as phalli as it would be to regard so the rounded granite bosses of the “Acropolis” hill, the place of which they obviously take.

Have all traces of Mazdaism gone from the native world since the disappearance of the Persian colony from Africa?

We find respect of the Sacred Fire among the tribes of South-West Africa, the Herrero and the Ovambo, both Bantu, and also among some other of the Southern Bantu tribes. The guardian of the Sacred Flame is always the senior wife of the chief of the tribe. By night the fire is kept in a hut in a special recess in the wall; by day it is taken outside.<sup>10</sup>

May not this cult of fire be a relic of the distant past, the respect of the Sacred Element, the Emblem of Ahura Mazda, brought over to Africa from Asia by the fire-worshipping followers of Zoroaster and borrowed by the Bantu tribes from older tribes, since disappeared or exterminated by the present population?

This article, of course, has not been written with the object of giving a full and exhaustive investigation into the ruins of Rhodesia. My object has been only to put the study on a proper scientific basis, and to offer the key to the solution of the riddle that has puzzled explorers and tourists who for decades have been visiting the ruins.

It is not for me to judge how far I have been successful in solving the riddle. “Feci quod potui; faciant meliora potentes”.

JOHANNESBURG,

2nd February 1931.

Translated for the author by

Malcolm Burr.

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<sup>10</sup> “Races of Africa”, by C. G. Seligman.